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MY FAVORITE HAMBURGER

Somewhere deep in the innermost regions of the American character there may dwell The Perfect Hamburger, the mold, the essence, the Platonic ideal. Here among us mortals, however, there can be no doubt of the identity of the perfect hamburger: it is mine. *Mine*. MINE! Well, you get the picture. In this age of post-Watergate good feeling, there is perhaps no easier way to start an argument than to advance the merits of one hamburger over another. Now since the hamburger is, ultimately, a (ahem!) trivial affair, differences of opinion over its merits tend to reveal more about the eater than the eaten. Here, then, is what certain prominent Texans consider to be the ideal hamburger.

George Bush, currently the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, admits to serving "a pretty mean hamburger every Sunday at our house. I do the cooking, but when the going gets tough, I can press some of our kids into service if they're home." In his full disclosure, Director Bush insists that the most important ingredient in any hamburger is a good grade of beef, basing this on his theory, "Let the meat do the talking."

T. A. "Amarillo Slim" Preston's hamburger is also heavy on the meat. At the home of the former World Poker Champion, the meat not only does the talking, it also does most of the ruminating in his back yard, where Preston—taking no chances—raises his own beef. Although not a hamburger eater by nature, when Slim does indulge, it's in a charcoal-broiled hamburger made at home with a regular bun, a lot of meat, mustard, onion, lettuce, and tomato, but *no* mayonnaise. "Mayonnaise is for sandwiches; that's just factual."

Many men share Preston's dislike for mayonnaise, including Marvin Zindler, Houston's consumer advocate at KTRK-TV; Zindler is also a meat man. So much that he likes his hamburger raw. Not rare, folks, raw; at the outside he'll accept it slightly warm.

Kaye Northcott, editor of the *Texas Observer*, would wince at the sight of a Zindler-burger. Kaye is on her way to becoming a vegetarian. However, during infrequent lapses—usually during deadline time—she has been known to eat a good, old-fashioned hamburger at Dan's on South Congress. Cheese, mustard, lettuce, and tomato are essential to her hamburger, but not as essential as the greasy onion rings.

Richard "Tres" Kleberg's nonchalance about his creation, the *no le hace* hamburger (roughly translated, the "it doesn't matter" burger) is deceptive. When it comes to hamburger, what clearly *does* matter to the King Ranch heir is what goes into its making. His butcher grinds sirloin and forms it into five-inch patties, which Kleberg considers the ideal diameter. Kleberg marinates the meat in a sauce of his own invention, which keeps the meat moist on the grill. His favorite condiment: a spoonful of picante sauce.

Tony Valone of Houston's posh Tony's restaurant does not feign indifference to hamburgers. Tony has to be in "a hamburger mood" before he'll put a burger to his lips. Such a mood is generally triggered by external forces. When his kids play softball in the park, something—nostalgia, maybe—sets off Tony's hamburger reflexes and he's off to Ruby Red's or Whataburger. Valone, for the record, subscribes to the cut-the-mayo school of hamburgers.

Not so, Lila Cockrell. San Antonio's mayor likes her hamburger with *everything*, mayonnaise included, with a side of french fries *and* onion rings. Her diet demands, however, occasional moderation: skim milk instead of a chocolate shake and only half the bun on the hamburger. Compromise. We live in a world of compromises.

Jethro Pugh, Dallas Cowboys defensive tackle, orders a hamburger from Guy's Drive-In during the season to break the monotony of training food. Pugh's ideal is a fat, juicy prime meat patty, medium well done, on a toasted, seedless bun, with sliced onion and tomato, a leaf of lettuce, and mayonnaise. Add a cold beer in a bottle and baked beans and the meal, according to Pugh, approaches perfection. It maynot, but who's going to argue with him?

What follows are six more Texans who consented to let everyone in on their preferred hamburger. Along with an occasional slice of onion, or tomato, these six photographs also provide a slice of life that is peculiarly Texan. As Judy Garland once told a Cairn terrier, "We aren't in Kansas, Toto."

—Judy Benson and Alice Gordon

